

Catholic education's advocacy shaped by first principles

by Ross Fox

National Catholic Education Commission

Funding for Australian schools has been prominent in media commentary in the last week. Under discussion is the important issue of what should happen to school funding in 2018 and beyond. The current school funding model has been enshrined in the Australian Education Act since 2014 and determines Commonwealth funding for all schools in Australia.

The complexity of school funding – across two tiers of government and across three sectors – combined with the large body of qualified commentators has created a lot of noise but not a lot of insight.

In this context, “a qualified commentator” means only that someone was a student at a school once or sent their own children to school at some stage.

Representing 765,000 students in 1,731 Catholic schools across Australia, the National Catholic Education Commission monitors issues related to school funding closely and has done so for decades. Given the funding arrangements in place today and the many competing descriptions of them, it is timely to return to first principles on school funding as a point of reference for how school funding should evolve.

The Funding Principles for Catholic Schools, published late last year, are the lens through which Catholic education in Australia understands school funding. The principles are intended to be universally and equally applicable and relevant across all schools.

Catholic schools see themselves as being in collaboration with parents and families. This understanding is informed by the belief that it is parents who are the first educators of their children. The primacy of the parent or carer is foundational to the first funding principle: parental choice.

Parental choice in a child's education, which is backed by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, has also been strongly supported by all Australian governments in a very practical way over recent decades.

Every student in every school has received at least a basic entitlement to government funding for several decades now. The enrolment patterns across Australia demonstrate that parents and students highly value choice in schools and this is true both within and between school sectors.

The second funding principle, religious freedom, again has universal application. Religious freedom is a basic freedom unquestionably supported in the Australian community and highly relevant to schools. Australia is, in many respects, a model of a successful multicultural and religiously diverse society where religious freedom is celebrated and treasured.

Religious freedom requires that Catholic schools be able to retain and enhance their identity and continue to provide the education that parents and students – Catholic and non-Catholic – sought when they chose that school. Government funding or regulation should never in any way remove or compromise that freedom.

Catholic education sees schooling as fundamentally about partnership. A successful school requires deep partnerships to be present among many members of a school community. This includes

parents and carers, teachers and school staff, students and, when it comes to the funding and regulation of schools, importantly state and federal governments.

One strength of school education in Australia is that almost 35 per cent of students attend schools that are not owned or operated by the government, including the 20 per cent of students who are in Catholic schools. This reality represents a deep partnership between government and the community.

On the specifics of funding, Catholic education supports a funding model that is based on transparent, reliable and objective data and that provides additional support for students with extra learning needs.

Since the earliest determination of state and federal governments to provide state aid to Catholic schools, funding has always been needs-based. As schooling expectations have changed and understandings of needs have changed, so too have the needs-based funding models that determine government funding for schools and systems. Needs-based funding must always be based on objective data and sound evidence.

Funding should be distributed equitably, reflecting the needs of students and school communities. And funding should be certain – which is one of the key concerns currently, as uncertainty continues to grow about funding for the 2018 school year and beyond.

Catholic education also advocates for accountability and transparency for all schools, with families, governments and the community able to see how schools use the government funding they receive.

Many of the issues that have driven public discussion about school funding over the past two weeks contradict some or all of those funding principles: Parental choice; religious freedom; educational partnership; a fair allocative mechanism; funding equity; funding certainty; and accountability and transparency.

The recent debate has seen some of the country's educational ideologues emboldened by the prospect of penalising students and families in non-government schools.

Some people have a polarised and distorted view of the educational world.

It's like an old western movie, with government schools the "goodies" and non-government schools the "baddies". It is based on a myth that non-government schools only educate students from wealthy backgrounds while government schools are left to educate only children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The reality is that all three school sectors – Catholic, independent and government – educate children from all economic, religious, social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Of the 100 Australian schools deemed to have the most advantaged students based on the Index of Community Socio-Educational Advantage, more than 60 are government schools.

Diverse enrolment patterns across Australian schools explain why there are high levels of government funding for students in all sectors.

Catholic schools receive 83 per cent of the per-student funding that government schools receive, on average. Independent schools receive lower levels of funding.

There has been much discussion recently of schools receiving more than their funding entitlement under the Australian Education Act and the Schooling Resource Standard, with some Catholic

schools said to be receiving higher funding allocations than their enrolments and needs suggest is appropriate.

Moving to a new funding model – as happened in 2014 following the Gonski Review of Funding for Schooling – can be a complicated exercise. Changing definitions of need within needs-based funding mean that funding allocations change. Schools need assistance to transition through this process.

The Australian Education Act incorporated a mechanism to do this. It was designed to help move schools towards the newly determined resourcing level calculated for their local context. Protection for schools facing changing circumstances must not be abandoned by government.

The schooling systems that govern about 85 per cent of Australian schools are designed to support the equitable distribution of government funding.

Catholic school systems are able to – and are encouraged to – allocate the government funding they receive to the schools and students most in need. They are able to make local decisions to make best use of public funding being invested in Australia's future through Catholic schools.

Some want that public funding to be cut. A smaller number want that public funding to be taken away completely.

There would be obvious and immediate consequences. With hundreds of thousands of families making significant economic sacrifices to cover school fees, reductions or the elimination of government funding would see government schools needing to accommodate students for whom there aren't sufficient places. And when those places are found, it will drive up taxes, as overall spending from governments on school education would balloon.

The complexity of school funding can create a lot of attention-grabbing headlines, but the reality is that the way governments support school education is working in the vast majority of the almost 10,000 schools in Australia. But it can be further improved.

Catholic education, armed with our funding principles, will play a constructive role in trying to bring about that improvement. We look forward to collaborating with others who want to similarly work for a system that supports all Australian students in all Australian schools.

Access Funding Principles for Catholic Schools at: <http://bit.ly/FundingPrinciples>